



**NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND
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FLETCHER STATEMENT ON SKYLAB PRIVATE COMMUNICATIONS

Dr. James C. Fletcher, Administrator of NASA, today made the following statement concerning private communications for Skylab, after a meeting with George M. Low, Deputy Administrator, Dale Myers, Associate Administrator for Manned Space Flight, and John Donnelly, Assistant Administrator for Public Affairs.:

Prior to the first flight of Skylab, we recognized that the long-duration flights of Skylab would present unusual and difficult operational conditions, and, therefore, planned for the possibility of private communications with the astronauts. Rules for these conversations were written in a memorandum dated May 3, 1973, a copy of which is attached.

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June 1, 1973

In brief, these rules called for three types of private conversations:

1. For Morale Purposes, to provide the opportunity for the astronauts to make private phone calls to their families once a week, normally on their off-duty day.

2. For Operational Reasons, as may be required in an "extreme operational emergency."

3. For Medical Reasons, to allow for a reasonable "doctor-patient" relationship in privacy.

On May 29, 1973, a private conversation for operational reasons was held at the request of Astronaut Conrad. After this conversation, it was questioned whether an "extreme operational emergency" indeed did exist. From what is known to us here on the ground, it would appear that it did not. However, we do not really know what was in the astronauts' minds -- they had been faced with a launch and rendezvous to a Skylab with serious damage of unknown specific proportions; they were unable to deploy the failed solar array and were thus facing a serious power shortage; they were finally able to dock only after a number of separate attempts, using the last of their emergency procedures; they did not know how successful they had been in deploying their sunshade; and temperatures in the Skylab were not coming down as rapidly as they had expected. They were concerned about all of these things, and about their ability to undock from the Skylab when required. In their minds, the sum of these may well have added up to a situation of serious enough concern to fit their definition of an "extreme operational emergency."

Under normal conditions, if they were here on the ground and not in space, it would be a simple matter to ask them how they really considered their position, and whether or not they believed an emergency situation existed. But these aren't normal conditions. A question from the ground now might be misinterpreted by the astronauts, and they might hesitate -- next time -- to call for a private conversation when one is needed. We believe that such matters should not be discussed with the astronauts during a flight, but only afterwards. We do not want to risk the safety of the flight by having the astronauts infer, from our questions, that they should not use the private communications loop when a real need might exist. We, therefore, do not intend to raise this question with them for the duration of the flight.

After the conversation of May 29, we stated that we would instruct the Capsule Communicator to ask the astronauts about their judgment of the seriousness of the situation before agreeing that a future private conversation should be held. After reviewing this decision, I have concluded that this too would be wrong: the very question might inhibit the Skylab crew from raising areas of concern which they should be able to raise. I have, therefore, decided to rescind this instruction.

Private conversations for operational reasons can also be requested from the ground, by the Skylab Program Director. These definitely will only be held in case of "extreme operational emergency," in situations which in his judgment clearly involve the success or safety of the mission.

In summary, we believe it would be imprudent to discourage requests by the crew for private operational communications. When private operational conversations are conducted, we will always release a paraphrase of these conversations. We will continue to leave it entirely up to the flight crew as to when

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to call for such a conversation, and will send no new instructions, or clarification of instructions. This decision was reached so that we would in no conceivable way inhibit them from calling for a private conversation when they believe a need exists, and so that we will not jeopardize the safety of the mission.

(End of release)